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ACTION WHA-01

INFO	LOG-00	COR-01	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-01	CIAE-00	SMEC-00
	INL-01	DODE-00	DOEE-00	SRFP-00	DS-00	EUR-01	H-01
	TEDE-00	INR-00	L-00	ADS-00	AC-01	DCP-01	NSAE-00
	OMB-01	OPIC-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00
	SP-00	SSO-00	TRSE-00	USIE-00	R-00	PMB-00	DSCC-00
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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6584

NSC WASHDC

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AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

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AMEMBASSY LIMA

AMEMBASSY MEXICO

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AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO

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AMEMBASSY QUITO

AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

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AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

AMEMBASSY PANAMA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY MADRID

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 004156

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING CLASSIFIED BY STATEMENT)

USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/09

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

REVIEW AUTHORITY: ALAN H FLANIGAN

CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED

DATE/CASE ID: 11 JUN 2007 200504156

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TAGS: PGOV, OAS, VE
SUBJECT: REFERENDUM EVE

CLASSIFIED BY NANCY MASON, DCM. REASON 1.5 (D)

SUMMARY

1. (U) ON THE EVE OF THE DECEMBER 15 REFERENDUM, INDICATIONS ARE THAT THE VOTE WILL BE A PEACEFUL, HONEST EXERCISE IN DEMOCRACY BY THE VENEZUELAN PEOPLE AS THEY DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO ACCEPT THE NEW CONSTITUTION DRAFTED BY THE NATIONAL CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. POLLS SUGGEST THE "YES" VOTE WILL PREVAIL EASILY, BUT THE ONLY POLL THAT COUNTS IS THE ACTUAL VOTE, AND WE MAKE NO PREDICTIONS. THERE WILL BE A LIMITED OBSERVATION BY THE OAS, IRI, NDI, CAPEL, AND THE CARTER CENTER; THE EMBASSY IS
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DEPLOYING OBSERVERS OF ITS OWN. FIRST RESULTS MAY BE AVAILABLE BY 7:00 P.M. (6:00 P.M. WASHINGTON TIME.) END SUMMARY.

DOWN TO THE WIRE AT LAST

2. (U) A YEAR AGO ALMOST TO THE DAY, HUGO CHAVEZ -- THE FORMER ARMY LIEUTENANT COLONEL WHO LED AN ABORTIVE COUP ATTEMPT IN 1992 -- WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT ON A PROGRAM WHOSE CENTERPIECE WAS A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY WHICH WOULD DRAFT A NEW CONSTITUTION THAT WOULD, HE MAINTAINED, MAKE GOVERNMENT MORE HONEST AND RESPONSIVE TO THE PEOPLE. IT WOULD, HE SAID, BREAK UP THE COZY POWER-SHARING ARRANGEMENT BETWEEN THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES (THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC COPEI AND THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC ACCION DEMOCRATICA) WHICH HAD DOMINATED VENEZUELAN POLITICS SINCE THE FALL OF THE DICTATOR MARCOS PEREZ JIMENEZ FORTY YEARS BEFORE -- AN ARRANGEMENT WHICH HE MAINTAINED WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE COUNTRY'S DECLINING LIVING STANDARDS CHRONICALLY INEFFICIENT PUBLIC SERVICES AND WIDESPREAD GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION.

3. (U) SINCE CHAVEZ' ELECTION, HIS PROJECT HAS DOMINATED VENEZUELAN POLITICAL LIFE TO THE EXCLUSION OF ALMOST ALL ELSE. MILESTONES HAVE INCLUDED APPROVAL IN AN APRIL 25 REFERENDUM BY 90 PERCENT OF VOTES CAST (ADMITTEDLY AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF A 60 PERCENT ABSTENTION RATE) OF THE CALLING OF A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY; A SWEEP BY CHAVEZ' SUPPORTERS IN THE JULY 25 ELECTION FOR THAT ASSEMBLY (THE ANC), WHO WON 60 PERCENT OF THE VOTES AND RECEIVED ALL BUT SIX OF THE SEATS; THE ANC'S SUBSEQUENT ASSERTION OF DOMINANCE OVER THE JUDICIARY AND THE CONGRESS; AND

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A DRAFTING PROCESS MADE DIFFICULT BY THE WIDE SPECTRUM OF
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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES REPRESENTED IN THE ASSEMBLY. THE TEXT
WAS FORMALLY HANDED OVER TO CHAVEZ A MONTH AGO. AND TOMORROW,
THE VENEZUELAN PEOPLE WILL DELIVER THEIR JUDGMENT ON IT.

THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION

4. (C) THIS IS NOT THE PLACE TO DESCRIBE IN DETAIL THE DRAFT
CONSTITUTION, WHICH WE HAVE REPORTED ON EXTENSIVELY. SUFFICE IT
TO SAY HERE THAT THE TEXT IS A LONG (350 ARTICLE) DOCUMENT WHICH
IS A SORT OF EXHAUSTIVE BLUEPRINT FOR AN IDEAL VENEZUELA. IT
CONTAINS MANY PROVISIONS THAT WE WOULD THINK MORE APPROPRIATE
FOR LEGISLATION THAN FOR A CONSTITUTION. SOME OF ITS PROVISIONS
-- SUCH AS ITS EMPHASIS ON HUMAN RIGHTS -- ARE LAUDABLE.
OPPONENTS CHARGE THAT ITS SOCIAL PROVISIONS ARE UNAFFORDABLE.
ITS ECONOMIC PROVISIONS CONTAIN BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE
ELEMENTS, SUCH AS GUARANTEES FOR PRIVATE PROPERTY AND A
CONTINUATION OF VENEZUELA'S TRADITION OF STATE ECONOMIC
DIRECTION. BUT THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT THE TEXT CONTINUES THE
TRADITION OF VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY AND COULD PROVIDE A PLATFORM
FOR SOUND ECONOMIC POLICIES IF -- AND WE STRESS IF -- CHAVEZ
CHOOSES TO IMPLEMENT THE SAME.

THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

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5. (C) PROPONENTS OF THE DRAFT WERE TAKEN ABACK WHEN INITIAL REACTION SHOWED A WIDER AND DEEPER OPPOSITION TO IT THAN THEY EXPECTED. CHAVEZ REACTED BY PLUNGING HIMSELF WHOLEHEARTEDLY INTO A CAMPAIGN IN WHICH HE MADE THE ISSUE LESS A REFERENDUM ON THE CONSTITUTION DRAFT (WHICH FEW VENEZUELANES HAVE READ) THAN A PLEBISCITE ON HIM. HIS OPPONENTS DID LIKEWISE, HOPING TO USE CHAVEZ OWN, OFTEN INTEMPERATE, RHETORIC (MOST RECENTLY HE DESCRIBED THE HIGHLY RESPECTED HEAD OF THE CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE AND TWO OTHER BISHOPS AS "NEEDING EXORCISM") TO CONVINCE VOTERS THAT THE NEW CONSTITUTION WOULD BE A TOOL HE WOULD USE TO GIVE FREE RANGE TO WHAT THEY DESCRIBED AS HIS AUTHORITARIAN TENDENCIES.

6. (C) IN THIS GAME, POLLS SUGGEST THAT CHAVEZ CAME OUT THE
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WINNER. THEY CURRENTLY GIVE A RANGE OF ABOUT 65-70 PER CENT IN FAVOR OF THE YES, WITH A RECENT POLL (PUBLISHED BY OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER "EL UNIVERSAL") GIVING THE "YES" AS HIGH AS 75 PER CENT. WE CAUTION, HOWEVER, THAT THE ONLY POLL THAT COUNTS IS THE ACTUAL VOTE DECEMBER 15, AND OFFER NO PREDICTIONS.

THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

7. (U) VOTING AT THE OVER 12,000 POLLING PLACES BEGINS AT 6:00 A.M. AND NOMINALLY CONTINUES UNTIL 4:00 P.M. HOWEVER, THE NATIONAL ELECTION COUNCIL (CNE) SAYS IT WILL KEEP POLLS OPEN AS LONG AS ANYONE IS STILL WAITING TO VOTE, AND PAST PRACTICE SUGGESTS VOTERS WILL MAKE USE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY. THE CNE HOPES FOR INITIAL "QUICK COUNT" RESULTS BY 7:00 P.M. (6:00 P.M. WASHINGTON TIME) BUT THIS COULD SLIP. THE CNE SAYS IT IS CONFIDENT THAT THE VOTING MACHINES AND BALLOTS -- WHICH REGISTERED SOME PROBLEMS IN THE JULY VOTE FOR THE ANC -- WILL PERFORM WITHOUT A HITCH.

OBSERVATION MISSIONS

8. (C) INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION WILL CONSIST OF FIVE PERSONS WITH THE CARTER CENTER, 11 FROM THE OAS, TWO FROM IRI, TWO FROM NDI, AND FOUR OR FIVE FROM CAPEL (THE CENTER FOR THE ASSISTANCE AND PROMOTION OF ELECTIONS), A COSTA RICAN ORGANIZATION SPECIALIZING IN THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF ELECTIONS. THE CARTER CENTER DELEGATION INCLUDES ITS LATIN AMERICAN PROGRAM DIRECTOR
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JENNIFER MCCOY, IFES LATIN AMERICAN DIRECTOR PATRICIO GAJARDO, AND TWO TECHNICAL EXPERTS. THE U.S.-FUNDED OBSERVERS FROM THE OAS WILL CONCENTRATE THEIR EFFORTS ON THE FUNCTIONING OF BALLOT COUNT; FOUR OF THE 11 OAS PEOPLE ARE TECHNICAL EXPERTS. THE OAS DELEGATION, ACCORDING TO DELEGATION LEADER SANTIAGO MURRAY, HAS BEEN GIVEN UNLIMITED ACCESS TO ALL ASPECTS OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS, INCLUDING TRANSMISSION CENTERS. THE OAS IS THE ONLY DELEGATION TO HAVE RECEIVED SUCH PRIVILEGED ACCESS; CAPEL AND THE CARTER CENTER REQUESTED BUT DID NOT RECEIVE IT, ACCORDING TO CARTER DELEGATION MEMBER LAURA NEUMAN. THE EMBASSY IS ALSO SENDING SOME 26 OFFICERS TO POLLING STATIONS IN SIX STATES AROUND THE COUNTRY IN AREAS WITH THE LARGEST CONCENTRATIONS OF VOTERS TO CARRY OUT INFORMAL OBSERVATION.

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GETTING OUT THE WORD

8. (U) FINAL RESULTS SHOULD BE AVAILABLE WELL BEFORE OOB
WASHINGTON TIME, DECEMBER 16. THE CARTER CENTER AND THE OAS
SUCCESSFULLY PERSUADED THE CNE TO BEGIN THE ELECTORAL AUDITING
PROCESS WITHIN 48 HOURS OF THE CLOSING OF THE POLLS; CARACAS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 03 CARACAS 004156

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URNS MAY BE OPENED FOR AUDITING AS EARLY AS 10:00 AM ON THE MORNING OF 16 DECEMBER. THE CNE HAD PREVIOUSLY PLANNED TO BEGIN THE AUDITING PROCESS ON SATURDAY. THE OAS AND THE CARTER CENTER SUCCESSFULLY CALLED THE CNE'S ATTENTION TO THE POLITICAL RISK INVOLVED IN SUCH A DELAY. THE AUDITING PROCESS WILL BE CONDUCTED BY 24 TRAINED TEAMS, INVOLVE 2.66 PERCENT OF THE VOTING TABLES, AND WILL BE OPEN TO PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION. WE WILL OF COURSE REPORT FULLY ON THE AUDIT RESULTS AS THEY BECOME AVAILABLE.

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